

Alberta 'no more lockdowns' rodeo held despite restrictions, sky-high case counts

ANDREA WOO >

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Anti-lockdown and anti-mask protesters take part in a rally outside the Alberta Legislature in Edmonton, on April 12, 2021.

JASON FRANSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Alberta's health authority says it is considering its legal options after a rodeo held on the weekend in protest of COVID-19 restrictions drew thousands of people together as the

province shattered multiple daily records for new infections.

Alberta recorded three consecutive days with more than 2,000 new COVID-19 cases each, including a record 2,433 on Friday. On Saturday, the province added another 1,731 cases, for a test positivity rate of 10.4 per cent.

The province has the highest rate of active COVID-19 cases in the country, with 509 per 100,000 people contracting the disease as of Saturday. Ontario, which has the second-highest rate, had 254 active cases per 100,000, while the national rate was 220 per 100,000.

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Despite this, a couple of thousand people gathered near Bowden, in central Alberta, for the “No more lockdowns rodeo rally” on the weekend. Videos from the event show large crowds sitting and standing close together with few, if any, masks being worn.

“Yesterday, we broke records, we had fast times in the barrel racing, retired bull riders pulling the gears out for another eight-second adrenaline ride,” organizer Northcott Rodeo Inc. wrote in a Facebook post on Sunday morning, in advance of a second day of activities. “But with the help of all of you, we were also the first rodeo in over a year where normality wasn’t even questioned.”

Owner Ty Northcott did not return calls for comment on Sunday.

Alberta Health Services (AHS) says inspectors spoke with, and provided written information to, event organizers prior to the rodeo, informing them of current health orders and stating that the event would be illegal if it were to proceed.

“It is disappointing that the organizers ignored this information and went ahead with their event, knowing it was a clear breach of the current public-health restrictions,” AHS said in a statement on Sunday.

“In addition, it is extremely concerning that people would knowingly put their fellow Albertans at risk by ignoring the restrictions, particularly with increasing cases and the subsequent pressure on our health care system.”

Just Thursday, Premier Jason Kenney announced several new measures to bring down infection rates, including stronger enforcement and fine-collection measures for those in contravention of public-health orders. But none was apparent at the rodeo.

RCMP Sergeant Shawn French said Sunday that police were present on both days to observe and keep the peace but that he was unaware of any tickets for violations.

Mr. Kenney said he was “angered and saddened” to see so many people selfishly put themselves ahead of others.

“Rodeo celebrates Alberta’s Western heritage, a key part of which is our community spirit and looking out for others, especially the vulnerable. That’s the opposite of what these folks are doing,” the Premier said in a statement on Sunday.

“The reason we are at this critical stage of the pandemic in Alberta, with record high daily case counts and intensive-care numbers, is precisely because too many Albertans are ignoring the rules we currently have in place.”

Also Sunday, the province announced it is suspending the spring sitting of the Alberta Legislature for at least two weeks in response to soaring case counts.

Government House Leader Jason Nixon said the need to pause the spring sitting was discussed with the Opposition – a claim that NDP Leader Rachel Notley rejected.

“We were not consulted on this decision,” she said. “We were told in a brief meeting this morning between the government and Opposition House leaders and the speaker.”

Ms. Notley said her party had planned to ask about the province’s triage protocol, school safety and the enforcement of restaurant restrictions during Question Period on Monday and called Mr. Kenney a “coward” for “fleeing the legislature” at a time when Albertans are seeking leadership.

The NDP Leader said the rodeo is the product of 12 months of mixed messages and the Premier’s own undermining of the value of health orders.

“In the more immediate sense, I do think that we need to look at more consistent enforcement and potentially greater consequences for breach of the rules,” she said.

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